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From the Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR

Aro Velmet

The past has never truly existed – after momentarily passing through our consciousness (during which we call it ‘the present’) it ceases to be and can never, outside the realm of science fiction anyway, be relived. Yet paradoxically, as William Faulkner has written, “The past is never dead – it is not even past”. It survives in our memories, in the wear-and-tear of physical objects, in monuments and memorials, in journals, newspapers, bed-time stories, popular music and, of course, historical narratives written by professional historians. Still, this past is no longer the authentic, platonic ideal of the Past, it exists, in David Lowenthal’s words, “as a realm both coexistent with and distinct from the present.” Our environment and our interests in the present condition what we remember of the past, and our writings, historical or otherwise, are at best representations of representations, human constructs at least twice removed from any real epistemology of the past, and even then, they remain always open to reinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Clearly then, the study of history should always be complemented by the study of metahistory and of memory. How are representations of the past created? What interests are at stake in the construction of monuments, in the production of memories and in the creation of academic historical narratives? To what ends are these representations employed, are they used as instruments of liberation, or of subjugation? E.H. Carr reminded us to “study the historian, before you begin to study the facts”.¹ The past cannot be detached from the person recounting it, and the person is inseparable from his social and cultural circumstances. Both, then, have to become objects of study. To that end, the spring issue of the seventeenth volume of the *Penn History Review* is dedicated to representations of history, their formation and applications, their uses and abuses. We are proud to present three outstanding essays written by Penn undergraduates, as well as an accompanying faculty essay, that all illuminate differ-

ent facets of representing history.

We start this issue of the *Review* with an essay by Kevin Platt, Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literature. Platt traces Stalinist representations of Ivan the Terrible through the early years of the twentieth century to contemporary Russia. Time and again, an image of the bloodthirsty and ruthless czar as a cunning diplomat and populist leader has surfaced in Russian collective consciousness. Using this particular case-study as an example, Platt shows how conservative interpretations of history have persisted in Russia, allowing for this repression of national trauma to sublimate into a collective identity that creates the space for the canonization of more recent, equally ruthless dictators. Clearly, such a representation of the past is often in the best interests of authoritarian leaders of the present.

Nowhere is the problem of representation more acute than in commemorations of the Holocaust. Any treatment of this dark episode in twentieth century history has to provide an answer to a truly complicated ethical paradox, as every Holocaust memorial has to both commemorate and purge, respect and remedy. This issue is further complicated by the boundaries imposed by the aesthetics of monumental art and the political and cultural limits imposed by society. Cecily Harris discusses the emergence of Holocaust 'counter-memorials' in postwar Germany. These are monuments that negate the traditional aesthetics of commemoration, that embody an anti-representational, anti-authoritarian, non-hierarchical spirit providing an insight into the collective psyche of the German nation today. Harris argues that the emergence of counter-memorials signifies the deep ambivalence Germans have towards the Holocaust, which is both an event so important that it requires commemoration, but also so shameful that it evokes a desire to forget. Furthermore, the rejection of traditional forms of commemoration suggests a tenuous relationship with the nation-state, as many symbols of nationalism are now seen as contaminated by an implicit association with National Socialism.

From popular representations, we move to professional history. Elijah Greenstein explores the creation of historical narratives about

the Maji Maji rebellion in present day Tanzania. Historical narratives written shortly after decolonization emphasized the ethnic unity of the Maji Maji rebellion and described it as primarily a reaction to German colonialism. However, contemporary research has questioned both of these assessments, pointing out inter-African tensions that fueled the conflict equally, if not more, than resentment towards the Europeans, and underscoring the ethnic diversity of the revolt. Far from being truly “the national epic of Tanzania”, Greenstein argues that historiography of the Maji Maji was shaped by the concerns of nation-builders in the 1960s, who were inclined to discount evidence that did not support the anti-colonialist nature of the rebellion.

Misrepresentations of history are not simply professional accidents, but can often become tools of repression and colonization. Emily Kern explores the use of colonial narratives of leprosy in the US annexation of Hawaii. In the late 19th century, through misreadings of scientific evidence and mythicized notions of purity and contamination, leprosy was seen as a mark of savagery and barbarism, as opposed to American exceptionalism expressed through capitalism and market democracy. This led to the increasing presence of American officials in Hawaiian affairs, believing that it is only through the imposition of American values that epidemics of leprosy can be contained. As a result, public health policies slowly but surely became tools of colonialism, culminating in the annexation of Hawaii in 1898.

The *Review* is proud to continue the long tradition of publishing abstracts of Senior Theses, written for the History Honors Program. The class of 2010 was the last class to write a thesis under the old, one-and-a-half-year long program and although subsequent classes in the new year-long program will undoubtedly lose a part of this valuable experience, the *Review* is confident that the level of scholarship will not diminish in the process. The *Review* would like to thank the Honors Directors: Steven Hahn, Robert St. George and particularly Ronald Granieri, the only Honors Director in recent years to stay with his students for the duration of the entire program.

The collection and publication of these papers was the collabo-

rative effort of many individuals. The *Review* would like to thank the many members of the history faculty who encouraged their students to submit essays for publication. The Editorial Board would like to especially thank Dr. Kathy Peiss, Chair of the History Department, for her support and guidance. We also thank the University of Pennsylvania and the History Department in particular for its financial support of the *Review*, its efforts to foster undergraduate research, and the commitment of its faculty to cultivating future historians.

Aro Velmet
Co-Editor-in-Chief

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 186

² E. H. Carr, *What is History*, New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 26